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Connecticut General Assembly Appropriations Committee Public Hearing, March 11, 2010

TESTIMONY FOR GOVERNOR'S 2010 DEFICIT MITIGATION PLAN

Good afternoon, Madam Chairwoman, Mister Chairman, distinguished Vice-Chairpersons and Ranking Members, and honorable members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Edith Karsky and I am Executive Director of the Connecticut Association for Community Action: our state's network of 12 federally designated anti-poverty agencies. Thank you for this opportunity to present our opposition to the Governor's March 1st Deficit Mitigation Plan, a proposal which would suspend the balance of funding for the Community Action Agency Human Services Infrastructure, leading to agency layoffs and a decrease in much needed services for our customers. I would also like to discuss the state's fiscal crisis and ways in which we believe our network can assist the state in saving money and better serving Connecticut's families during these very difficult times.

We are all well aware that Connecticut's unprecedented financial challenges are touching all residents and the numbers of people needing assistance have been skyrocketing. During the current economic recession, we have seen a 40% increase in people coming through our doors for help. Our Community Action Agency (CAA) network stands ready to work with the Governor and the Legislature by continuing to work with the poorer citizens of our state and with those who are newly unemployed and need services in a streamlined, efficient, cost-effective manner. We have a successful structure in place to provide direct social services to people in all of our state's 169 cities and towns. This system, the CAA Human Services Infrastructure (HSI), has a proven track record of helping low-income residents of Connecticut and helping the Department of Social Services and other state agencies operate more efficiently. We are confident we can contribute to our state's competitiveness by continuing to build economic self-sufficiency and workforce preparedness for our residents.

To help overcome today's fiscal constraints and resolve some of the budget problems, **the following are some suggestions as to how our network can provide services to reduce costs to the State:**

- Provide pre-application assistance for major DSS programs and re-determination;
- Perform outreach, education, and application assistance for federally funded programs, such as the Supplemental Food Assistance Program (SNAP), and HUSKY;
- Deliver pre-employment services to provide individuals with the skills necessary to complete job applications and related paperwork—especially ESL customers;
- Act as the fiduciary for small community-based organizations (CBOs), utilizing a master contracting concept to lessen unnecessary and duplicative paper work, increase timely payments, and facilitate pilot programs;
- Administer supportive services, such as Homemaker Services and Meals on Wheels, that maintain elders' independence;
- Utilize energy assistance eligibility as a basis for categorical DSS program eligibility (similar to Head Start eligibility being presumptive eligibility for HUSKY); and
- Serve as state satellite offices for state agency employees.

Connecticut's network of CAAs has a history of meeting the state's fiscal challenges by offering new and creative ways to deliver much needed services in a cost-effective, dependable and efficient manner. Here are just three examples:

- Under Governor Weicker, the CAAs extended their application intake and certification role from serving only Department of Human Resources clients to serving all energy assistance clients, including those from the Department of Income Maintenance;
- Under Governor Rowland, the CAAs became the "local" sites and intermediary agents and partners for DSS when the Department had to close certain offices—CAAs took applications for elderly and handicapped customers and faxed or delivered them to state offices, even providing transportation for customers when necessary; and
- In 2003 and 2004, the CAA network expanded its partnership with the Commissioner of DSS by becoming the foundational partner in the Human Services Infrastructure - with customer-focused, integrated service delivery, CAAs prepared customers for the state services application process, leading to productive initial visits with eligibility workers and a speedier, more efficient delivery of services.

While there is talk of the need for regional cooperation, which we fully support, we would like to remind policy makers that we do not need to create a new system, body, council, or network for regional social services delivery: **the Community Action Agencies' HSI, an efficient and cost-effective statewide system with regional offices, is in place providing services, tracking and reporting outcomes, and established in local communities as the place people to go when they need assistance.** In addition, many towns have eliminated their human services departments and rely upon the community action network to pick up the slack—the CAA HSI state funds are crucial in maintaining these basic safety net services to low-income and working poor families during the worse economic recession in recent memory.

The Human Services Infrastructure (HSI) is not a program and it is not a silo. It is a funnel that guides clients through a complex service system and it does so efficiently and cost-effectively. It ensures a cost-effective use of taxpayer dollars and it provides better service by eliminating duplication, improving client outcomes, and producing better client outcome data across all state and federally funded programs. In essence, HSI has become the "single stop" system for providing programmatic assistance and case management services. CAA case managers serve their customers holistically, helping them navigate through the system to get food, eviction-prevention, mortgage-foreclosure prevention, shelter for the homeless, heating and weatherization assistance, basic education and job training, child care assistance, credit repair and money management, free income tax preparation, health access, and services for seniors. Clients need only enter one door to receive all of the services, information and/or referrals they need. Agency staffs have experience and expertise and provide excellent customer service using this integrated service approach. **At this, the greatest time of need since the Great Depression, we don't need to build a new model, but we do need to preserve the CAA HSI—a proven model that works, is cost-effective and serves all areas of the state with customer-focused, integrated service delivery.**

In summary, we hope we can help you solve some of the budget problems. Thank you for your ongoing support for our agencies. We look forward to opportunities to work with you and the Governor in moving state government and its residents from crisis to stability and prosperity.